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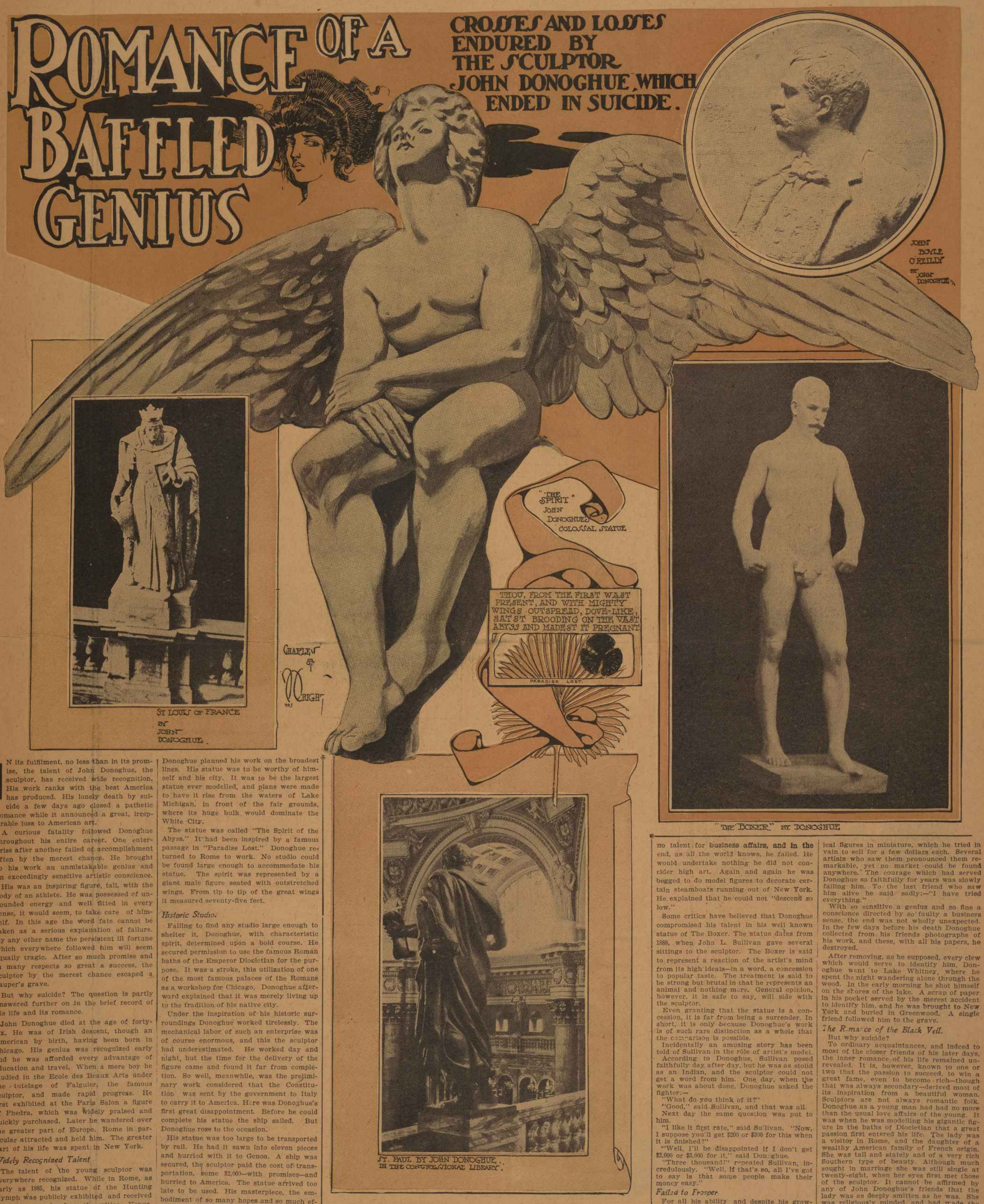
ROMANCE OF A BAFFLED GENIUS

CROSSES AND LOSSES ENDURED BY THE SCULPTOR JOHN DONOGHUE, WHICH ENDED IN SUICIDE.



IN its fulfilment, no less than in its promise, the talent of John Donoghue, the sculptor, has received wide recognition. His work ranks with the best America has produced. His lonely death by suicide a few days ago closed a pathetic romance while it announced a great, irreparable loss to American art.

A curious fatality followed Donoghue throughout his entire career. One enterprise after another failed of accomplishment often by the merest chance. He brought to his work an unmistakable genius and an exceedingly sensitive artistic conscience.

His was an inspiring figure, tall, with the body of an athlete. He was possessed of unbounded energy and well fitted in every sense, it would seem, to take care of himself. In this age the word fate cannot be taken as a serious explanation of failure. By any other name the persistent ill fortune which everywhere followed him will seem equally tragic. After so much promise and in many respects so great a success, the sculptor by the merest chance escaped a pauper's grave.

But why suicide? The question is partly answered further on in the brief record of his life and its romance.

John Donoghue died at the age of forty-six. He was of Irish descent, though an American by birth, having been born in Chicago. His genius was recognized early and he was afforded every advantage of education and travel. When a mere boy he studied in the Ecole des Beaux Arts under the tutelage of Falguier, the famous sculptor, and made rapid progress. He first exhibited at the Paris Salon a figure of Phedra, which was widely praised and quickly purchased. Later he wandered over the greater part of Europe. Rome in particular attracted and held him. The greater part of his life was spent in New York.

Widely Recognized Talent.

The talent of the young sculptor was everywhere recognized. While in Rome, as early as 1885, his statue of the Hunting Nymph was publicly exhibited and received the highest praise from the critics. Venus, his next great work, was shown in Venice and, later, in London. It did much to establish the reputation of the rising American sculptor. The future seemed assured. Donoghue's genius was by this time generally recognized in Europe. He was still young, enthusiastic and energetic. The time seemed ripe for a great effort, and most opportunely, as it seemed, now came the opportunity. The date of the World's Fair at Chicago was fixed for 1893, and Donoghue was given an opportunity to contribute.

It should be remembered that Donoghue was by birth a Chicagoan, filled with pride and ambition for his native city. His residence abroad had served but to quicken his pride while it had trained his genius. The psychological moment seemed at hand. Donoghue planned his work on the broadest lines. His statue was to be worthy of himself and his city. It was to be the largest statue ever modelled, and plans were made to have it rise from the waters of Lake Michigan, in front of the fair grounds, where its huge bulk would dominate the White City.

The statue was called "The Spirit of the Abyss." It had been inspired by a famous passage in "Paradise Lost." Donoghue returned to Rome to work. No studio could be found large enough to accommodate his statue. The spirit was represented by a giant male figure seated with outstretched wings. From tip to tip of the great wings it measured seventy-five feet.

Historic Studio.

Failing to find any studio large enough to shelter it, Donoghue, with characteristic spirit, determined upon a bold course. He secured permission to use the famous Roman baths of the Emperor Diocletian for the purpose. It was a stroke, this utilization of one of the most famous palaces of the Romans as a workshop for Chicago. Donoghue afterward explained that it was merely living up to the tradition of his native city.

Under the inspiration of his historic surroundings Donoghue worked tirelessly. The mechanical labor of such an enterprise was of course enormous, and this the sculptor had underestimated. He worked day and night, but the time for the delivery of the figure came and found it far from completion. So well, meanwhile, was the preliminary work considered that the Constitution was sent by the government to Italy to carry it to America. Here was Donoghue's first great disappointment. Before he could complete his statue the ship sailed. But Donoghue rose to the occasion.

His statue was too large to be transported by rail. He had it sawn into eleven pieces and hurried with it to Genoa. A ship was secured, the sculptor paid the cost of transportation, some $2,000—with promises—and hurried to America. The statue arrived too late to be used. His masterpiece, the embodiment of so many hopes and so much effort, lay under a great tarpaulin on a deserted dock in Brooklyn, with none to see or appreciate its majesty, its colossal dignity.

The blow would have crushed a less courageous spirit. Donoghue recovered instantly. With the lightheartedness which won for him so many friends he immediately rushed into the great competition for sculptors at the World's Fair.

Won First Prize.

The Fine Arts Department of the exhibition was compelled to choose from among seventy competitors, including well known sculptors of several countries. Fourteen of these were Americans. Donoghue was awarded the first prize. Nothing did so much to announce his genius as his work in this competition. The effort came from the depths of his despair, yet the lightness and delicacy of his touch and, most of all, his choice of subject can only be accounted for as a touch of genius.

His statue was a superb nude figure of Sophocles leading the chorus after the Battle of Salamis. The statue represents the poet as a lithe and youthful figure as he danced and sang in the military parade in the streets of Athens before the trophies captured at Salamis. It is the perfect embodiment of the joyous, impulsive temperament of the Greek.

Donoghue's genius was never more happily inspired. One can only marvel that in the face of such discouragement the sculptor should have chosen a theme so lighthearted and care free.

Following this Donoghue made several notable contributions to several public buildings throughout the United States. For the Congressional Library at Washington he prepared one of the great arches and, in addition, the statue of St. Paul. He modelled two busts, one of Governor Ames and another of John Boyle O'Reilly, for the Boston Public Library, as well as the heroic figure of St. Louis of France which adorns the court house of the Appellate Division in New York.

Scorned Commercial Work.

A great commercial success was now opened to Donoghue, but he persistently refused to take advantage of it. He would do nothing unworthy of his genius. His choice was a very difficult one. He had little or no talent for business affairs, and in the end, as all the world knows, he failed. He would undertake nothing he did not consider high art. Again and again he was begged to do model figures to decorate certain steamboats running out of New York. He explained that he could not "descend so low."

Some critics have believed that Donoghue compromised his talent in his well known statue of The Boxer. The statue dates from 1888, when John L. Sullivan gave several sittings to the sculptor. The Boxer is said to represent a reaction of the artist's mind from its high ideals—in a word, a concession to popular taste. The treatment is said to be strong but brutal in that he represents an animal and nothing more. General opinion, however, it is safe to say, will side with the sculptor.

Even granting that the statue is a concession, it is far from being a surrender. In short, it is only because Donoghue's work is of such rare distinction as a whole that the comparison is possible.

Incidentally an amusing story has been told of Sullivan in the rôle of artist's model. According to Donoghue, Sullivan posed faithfully day after day, but he was as stolid as an Indian, and the sculptor could not get a word from him. One day, when the work was about done, Donoghue asked the fighter:—

"What do you think of it?"

"Good," said Sullivan, and that was all.

Next day the same question was put to him.

"I like it first rate," said Sullivan. "Now, I suppose you'll get $200 or $300 for this when it is finished?"

"Well, I'll be disappointed if I don't get $2,000 or $3,000 for it," said Donoghue.

"Three thousand!" repeated Sullivan, incredulously. "Well, if that's so, all I've got to say is that some people make their money easy."

Failed to Prosper.

For all his ability and despite his growing popularity, Donoghue failed to prosper. But he never capitulated. He still refused to "sink so low" as to perform work against his best judgment or in any respect to compromise his artistic conscience. Disappointment followed disappointment. A year ago still another opportunity presented itself, full of promise. He was invited to compete for the memorial to McKinley to be erected in Philadelphia. His friends urged him to do so. He chose for his subject a figure typifying Protection standing in front of the bust of McKinley, and set to work. The model was completed and submitted, when it was found that money appropriated for the work would not be sufficient to carry out so ambitious an idea. The model was returned.

This last disappointment all but crushed him. Persistent ill fortune seemed to close every door. During the last few months Donoghue made desperate efforts to dispose of his work, but without success. His last attempt was the modelling of several classical figures in miniature, which he tried in vain to sell for a few dollars each. Several artists who saw them pronounced them remarkable, yet no market could be found anywhere. The courage which had served Donoghue so faithfully for years was slowly failing him. To the last friend who saw him alive he said sadly:—"I have tried everything."

With so sensitive a genius and so fine a conscience directed by so faulty a business sense, the end was not wholly unexpected. In the few days before his death Donoghue collected from his friends photographs of his work, and these, with all his papers, he destroyed.

After removing, as he supposed, every clew which would serve to identify him, Donoghue went to Lake Whitney, where he spent the night wandering alone through the wood. In the early morning he shot himself on the shores of the lake. A scrap of paper in his pocket served by the merest accident to identify him, and he was brought to New York and buried in Greenwood. A single friend followed him to the grave.

The Romance of the Black Veil.

But why suicide?

To ordinary acquaintances, and indeed to most of the closer friends of his later days, the inner romance of his life remained unrevealed. It is, however, known to one or two that the passion to succeed, to win a great fame, even to become rich—though that was always secondary—derived most of its inspiration from a beautiful woman. Sculptors are not always romantic folk. Donoghue as a young man had had no more than the usual love affairs of the young. It was when he was modelling his gigantic figure in the baths of Diocletian that a great passion first entered his life. The lady was a visitor in Rome, and the daughter of a wealthy American family of French origin. She was tall and stately and of a very rich Southern type of beauty. Although much sought in marriage she was still single at twenty-eight, when her eyes first met those of the sculptor. It cannot be affirmed by any of John Donoghue's friends that the lady was as deeply smitten as he was. She was religiously minded, and had made the possibility of her taking the veil of a nun the excuse for turning away many adorers, but it is certain that her interest in the earnest man toiling over his giant statue of "The Spirit of the Abyss" was more than love of the aesthetic called for. What has been gathered from a few detached phrases of the sculptor's shows that he believed she would wait for him. A great triumph, not an ordinary success, was his aim and his cry.

"Then she need not care what they say."

Whether it was a compact between them or simply a condition laid down in his great pride of art cannot now be said.

"She gave me her hand in the moonlight. It is a bargain. She is firm as St. Peter's. The burden is on me."

That was all. Time showed how he hoped and struggled, and at last how despair overcame him. The lady has taken the black veil; the sculptor is in his lonely grave. The silent romance is registered only in the dim archives of a buried memory.